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A pandemic in all but name

The spread of the coronavirus beyond China is entering a critical new phase

WILL the coronavirus outbreak become a pandemic? It is increasingly looking like it won't – but only in name. At a press briefing on 25 February, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO), Tedros Ghebreyesus, expressed a reluctance to use the term until the covid-19 disease spreads more widely and causes more harm, in order, it seems, to prevent fear or panic.

In fact, it looks like the WHO is no longer using any particular official criteria to trigger the use of the word pandemic, although it says it is still prepared to use the term when it sees fit.

The decision seems like an odd one: to many infectious disease experts, the virus – which now has significant outbreaks in South Korea, Iran and Italy (see page 7) – has already reached pandemic levels.

Regardless of what we call it, we appear to be entering a new phase of the global outbreak. Efforts to restrict the covid-19 virus to China have failed, and in some countries the focus will have to turn towards mitigation rather than containment, as they try to slow the

"The scenario in which the virus spreads worldwide and most of us encounter it is looking more likely"

spread of the infection to stop hospitals all being overwhelmed at once.

This means that the scenario in which the virus eventually spreads worldwide, and most of us encounter it is looking more likely.

If this happens, the virus will ultimately become like flu – a widely

circulating infection that most of us will eventually acquire some immunity to. But before then the human cost will be high, especially among the over 60s and people with some pre-existing medical conditions. Flu can already be deadly for these groups, but at least we have some previous immunity to flu strains, and vaccines are available each flu season for the most vulnerable among us.

Right now, almost none of us have immunity to this coronavirus and it will be many months before the vaccines against it currently in development can be proven both safe and effective.

The more we can do to slow the virus, the more time we will buy ourselves to get prepared. As individuals, we should do everything we can to help authorities reduce the speed at which the infection spreads. ■

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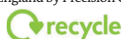
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